

Abstract Ideas and Uses of Language

John, Hannah, Simon, Maddy and Larkin

Locke on Abstraction

- General terms, which stand for abstract ideas, allow for ease of communication
- General terms are made through a process of abstraction:
 - 1) The word is made to represent a general idea
 - 2) An idea is made general by separating its essence (generality) from all particularities
- “Words become general by being made the signs of general ideas; and ideas become general by separating from them the circumstances of time and place...” (AW 377).

Locke on Abstraction Cont.

- Understanding of abstract terms is gained over the course of development: a child does not understand the words 'mother' and 'father' to be anything other than particulars
- Degrees of abstraction (ex: cat to mammal to animal)
- General ideas stand for a type of things; abstract ideas are the essence of a 'sort' of entities
- “Now since nothing can be a man... nor anything to be a man, or have a right to the species man, but what has the essence of that species, it follows that the abstract idea for which the name stands, and the essence of the species, is one and the same” (AW 379).

Berkeley on Abstraction

- Locke says we abstract from sense experience to get ideas of primary qualities (i.e. extension)
- Two types of processes that could be abstraction:
- A1: considering one property of an object independently of others
 - All we have is experience of particular sensations
 - A1 is not abstraction, just independence of ideas
- "Thus, I imagine the trunk of a human body without the limbs, or conceive the smell of a rose without thinking on the rose itself...But my conceiving or imagining power does not extend beyond the possibility of real existence or perception," ((Principles §5, AW 447b-445a).

Berkeley Abstraction cont.

- But maybe we can create a positive idea of 'red' by abstracting from our visual idea of the apple
- A2: forming an abstract, general idea
- Problems: think of 'triangle'
 - This triangle would need to be equilateral, isosceles, and scalene all at once
 - Idea of 'triangle' would be one particular triangle because we can not imagine all these at once
- We don't have psychological capacity for A2

Berkeley on math

- Without abstraction, it seems we lose math
- We can use particular terms generally without appealing to abstract ideas
 - We can use general ideas of 'triangle' without thinking that it corresponds to something real
 - We only have discrete sensations, even in math
 - We can still do math, it just doesn't mean anything

Locke on Language

- Locke's theory of language relies on abstract ideas.
 - Abstraction leads us to general terms, which we use to stand for all particulars, but are not based strictly on those particulars' properties, but the general *idea* of 'apple' or 'triangle.' (See *Essay* III.iii.6)
 - We use the commonalities between individual cases to build up an abstraction to help us categorize similar experiences in the future.
 - We are socialized to apply the general terms of language to the abstract ideas we come up with.

Locke on Language (continued)

- That general terms can only apply to abstract ideas means that without knowledge of these ideas, we can come to no conclusions about a thing's essence.
 - This is complicated by our individual capacities to abstract from particulars. Each person could have an entirely different conception of what the abstract idea referred to by 'man' or 'apple.' Or even slightly different ideas.
 - Like Hobbes, Locke attributes most philosophical disagreements to confusions like this, which (in Locke's case) arise from mistaking the abstract ideas that words represent for real objects.

Berkeley on Language

- We can use general terms, but we shouldn't fool ourselves into thinking that they correspond to actual abstract *things* that exist.
- Only particulars exist. Generals only exist in language. (Nominalism).
- Two different kinds of language use:
 1. Words that communicate ideas
 - Like the individual properties of yellowness, juiciness, and sourness that all together make up the general term "lemon."
 2. Words that incite action
 - Arousal of emotions, persuasion, threats, promises

Berkeley on Language Cont.

- The incorrect belief that there is such a thing as "abstraction" or "abstract ideas" arises from our ability to generalize in language.
 - There may appear to be some sort of "abstraction" going on in language, but this is not the case. Roundness, grayness, and smoothness can exist independently from a particular stone, but the general, abstract ideas of shape, color, and texture cannot.
 - Really, universal words are just convenient generalizations used for communication, persuasion, categorization and description that in no way illustrate how our minds work.
 - Berkeley and Locke don't agree here. Berkeley:
 - "A word becomes general by being made the sign... of several particular ideas" (AW 442). (Not, as Locke would have it, of general ideas).

Recap

Locke - Abstraction is used to explain how ideas correspond to general terms. We move outward from general terms like 'chair' and 'couch' to 'furniture' and so on in concentric circles until we reach the term 'physical object'.

sensations - particular terms - general terms - physical objects

Berkeley - Abstraction only leads to skepticism and atheism

A1: Names are given to a collection of properties at a given time - not a complete object.

A2: We form a visual idea of a particular object, collecting general terms until we reach something concrete.

What We Can Take Away

Both Locke and Berkeley take a step away from the "Sanctuary of Ignorance" by denying that we can simply rely on the goodness of God when confronted with a logical inconsistency.

Problems: Berkeley says that we can think of properties independently of their objects. Can we really think of the smell of a rose without thinking of the rose itself?

Both Locke and Berkeley reject innate ideas but they both appeal to some sort of logical framework. Where does this ability to reason come from if it is not innate, created by us or created by God?

Moving Forward

Hume picks up where Locke and Berkeley left off with skepticism

- Particular ideas refer to particular objects but we can repurpose a particular idea to refer to a general idea without having them refer to abstract ideas.

"The idea of extension...is wholly dependent on the sensible ideas or the ideas of secondary qualities. Nothing can save us from this conclusion but the asserting that the ideas of those primary qualities are attained by abstraction; an opinion which, if we examine it accurately, we shall find to be unintelligible, and even absurd" (Enquiry, §XII.1, AW 595b).

Hume proposes his three principles of connection (resemblance, contiguity, and cause and effect) to replace Locke's Abstract ideas.